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Municipal complaint? There's an app for that

The Boston Globe

Tech-savvy staff bridges a gap

By Michael Levenson, Globe Staff | July 6, 2009

Boston City Hall, a drab concrete monument to 1960s Brutalism run by a self-described urban mechanic who despises voice mail, isn't exactly known as a hotbed of technological innovation.

But within, a few young, tech-savvy aides are trying to drag municipal government into the age of mobile gadgetry. And they think they've hit on something big: a "killer app" that marries 21st-century technology with Mayor Thomas M. Menino's old-school devotion to pothole politics.

City officials will soon debut Boston's first official iPhone application, which will allow residents to snap photos of neighborhood nuisances - nasty potholes, graffiti-stained walls, blown street lights - and e-mail them to City Hall to be fixed.

City officials say the application, dubbed Citizen Connect, is the first of its kind in the nation. It was designed as an extension of the city's 24-hour complaint hotline for the younger set, making the filing of complaints quicker and easier for iPhone users.

"If I'm just walking along the sidewalk and I have a complaint - maybe a storm knocked down a tree - I could take a photo and send it immediately," said Christopher Loh, 28, a press assistant in the mayor's office who helped come up with the idea for the program. "You don't have to bumble around looking for a number to call. It's right there in the palm of your hand."

In a city like Boston, where some residents keep a sharp eye on their neighbors for trash and parking violations, the application presents the potential for a whole new way to kick up neighborhood scuffles.

Just imagine it: It's a week after a winter storm and the snow has been cleared from the streets, but the curbs are still lined illegally with trash barrels and lawn chairs to protect coveted parking spaces. Suddenly, that iPhone is good for more than checking e-mail and Facebook.

Some neighborhood activists are clamoring over the chance to crack down on scofflaws, this time with photographic evidence.

"If we had a community of dog-walkers armed with iPhones who could report this activity and publicize it, it would make a huge difference," said Anne Swanson, who cochairs Graffiti NABbers, a volunteer brigade that patrols the Back Bay for graffiti. "I think it's a great tool."

The application was largely the brainchild of Nigel Jacob, a 36-year-old mayoral aide who totes a silver MacBook covered in bumper stickers and holds the exalted title senior adviser for emerging technology.

Like many City Hall staff members, Jacob uses a BlackBerry, rather than an iPhone. But he, Loh, and a few other aides hit upon the idea for an iPhone application while brainstorming last winter. Jacob sketched some ideas on paper, then presented his proposal to the mayor.

"I loved it," Menino said. "I get excited about this technology stuff because it's new, it's innovative, and it's something we don't get a lot of credit for doing."

City officials say they expect to pay Connected Bits, the New Hampshire firm that designed the software, about \$25,000 for technical support this year, and then review whether the cost is worth it.

“We chose the iPhone mostly because of its sex appeal - because it’s new and it’s hot,” Jacob said.

The application, which will be free to download from Apple, will allow residents to use the global positioning system function on their iPhones to pinpoint the precise location of the problem for City Hall. After submitting a complaint, users will get a tracking number, so they can pester city officials if the problem persists.

In the past, residents have grumbled that their complaints disappeared into a bureaucratic black hole. Some said they had to call the city hotline repeatedly to get results. A new computer system Menino installed last fall has quickened response times.

The iPhone initiative is part of a push to make City Hall younger, hipper, and generally more user-friendly, a campaign that Menino has intensified during the mayor’s race.

One of his opponents, 39-year-old City Councilor Sam Yoon, has repeatedly needled the mayor for not having voice mail at City Hall. Another challenger, 39-year-old City Councilor Michael F. Flaherty, has printed pamphlets that liken the 66-year-old mayor to a clunky portable phone and himself to - wait for it -an iPhone.

Menino has said he fears that too much technology could allow government to lose the personal touch. But he insisted he is excited about the new application and plans to buy an iPhone so he, too, can report potholes, faded crosswalks, and overflowing trash cans.

“If you look at the 24-hour hotline, who’s the person who calls the most times?” Menino said. “It’s me. I’m going to use it. I’ll tell you if it works well or not.” ■

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